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SUBJECT: MOSCOW'S CHIEF MUFTI STRESSES TOLERANCE AND
INCREASED INTERACTION WITH AMERICAN MUSLIMS

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Chairman of the Kremlin-friendly Council of Muftis of Russia Ravil Gaynutdin told the Ambassador on November 13 that Russia's Muslims practice a tolerant form of Islam and are receiving increasing support from the GOR. This is most evident, according to Gaynutdin, in the huge expansion underway at his mosque near the center of Moscow. Despite a misunderstanding that led to the cancellation of a proposed International Visitor Leadership Program, Gaynutdin expressed a desire to continue to work closely with the Embassy on future exchange programs. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) The Ambassador met on November 13 with Ravil Gaynutdin, Chairman of the Council of Muftis and Chief Mufti at the Moscow's Cathedral Mosque next to the huge indoor stadium built for the 1980 Olympic Games. The meeting took place at Gaynutdin's office adjacent to the site of a planned, multi-year expansion of the mosque and construction of a combined Islamic business/conference/trade center. Gaynutdin expressed his appreciation for many years of close relations with the Embassy, including private visits with U.S. ambassadors and invitations to diplomatic receptions at Spaso House. Gaynutdin had agreed to meet with the Ambassador during a break in a conference in Moscow sponsored by the Council of Muftis on strengthening Islamic culture in Russia.

¶3. (SBU) Gaynutdin congratulated the Ambassador on the recently completed U.S. presidential elections, saying that like the rest of the world, Russians were interested in how the campaign was run and the platforms of the candidates. Most importantly, he emphasized, Russians saw how a real democracy works, especially how it dealt with matters of religion and race. He hoped that with the new administration, mutual understanding between Russia and the U.S. would be strengthened. He admitted that the August conflict between Georgia and Russia had caused a problem, but that the world's two superpowers must cooperate.

Russia's Muslims Benefit from Good Relations with the GOR

¶4. (SBU) Gaynutdin stated that Islam is a core religion in Russia -- not a religion of immigrants -- and actually predates Orthodox Christianity in some parts of the country. He stressed that Russia's Muslims have good relations with all the other major religions of Russia (he specifically mentioned Russian Orthodoxy, Buddhism, Judaism, and western Christianity). Gaynutdin said he was the driving force for the establishment of an inter-religious council that has resulted in greater interfaith stability and added that his deputy is a member of its coordinating group.

¶5. (SBU) According to Gaynutdin, President Dmitriy Medvedev and Premier Vladimir Putin are more religious than was Boris Yeltsin and this has improved the position of all religions in Russia. Over the last two years, Russia's Muslims have benefited from government assistance that has helped train imams and increased support for Muslim media. Gaynutdin said

he wants to continue the muftiate's cooperation with the government, including Medvedev's Council on Religions and the State Duma's Commission on Religion. Gaynutdin proudly said that he is the only Muslim member of the Public Chamber.

16. (SBU) As a result of his close relationship with the government, Gaynutdin said that Putin had supported the construction of a new mosque in Moscow while he was still president of Russia. Moscow mayor Yuriy Luzhkov had donated nearly a block of prime real estate adjacent to the existing mosque north of the Garden Ring Road near Prospect Mir. Gaynutdin explained that the ongoing "reconstruction" of the existing mosque will transform it into a house for 10,000 worshippers. The muftiate will next add a conference center capable of expanding participation by an additional 12,000-15,000 in adjacent halls and eventually a business center with a halal grocery and a community center for Muslim cultural events. Gaynutdin stressed that contributions for the construction of these venues will come only from Russia's Muslim community and not from abroad. He said this has made the process difficult and slow, but that the muftiate had decided from the start that no foreign money would be accepted for its construction. He hoped the first milestone, construction of one of the two 85-meter minarets, would be finished in time for Kurban Bairam in December 2008. He noted proudly that when finished, the new mosque will be three times larger than the Qol Sharif Mosque opened in July 2005 within the Kremlin of Kazan in his native Tatarstan.

17. (SBU) According to Gaynutdin, the muftiate has questioned plans by the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) to require the study of Russian Orthodoxy as a required subject in Russian

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public schools. The members of the muftiate have asked ROC leaders to consider also instruction about Islam in the schools. Gaynutdin stressed that Russian children need to learn not only about their own religion, but also about the religion of their neighbors. He added that it would be wrong to teach Russia's Muslim children that Islam is the only true religion.

Gaynutdin Keen on Further Cooperation with U.S.

18. (SBU) Gaynutdin said that he and other members of the muftiate are prepared to participate in international programs and conferences dealing with tolerance and the dialogue among civilizations. Without admitting any involvement in the cancellation of a planned August 2008 IVLP on Islam in America, he said that invitations for foreign travel by imams funded by the USG should be transmitted through the Council of Muftis. He noted that one of the muftis selected to participate in the August 2008 program had announced his selection on his personal website prior to receiving permission to travel from the Council of Muftis. Gaynutdin recalled that during a conference in Indonesia in February 2008 he met an imam from New York who shared views on tolerance similar to those held by Russia's Muslims. He noted that since the 1990's, the muftiate has not had much contact with Muslim groups in the U.S., nor does it have strong relations with any Muslim organizations there. Gaynutdin asked the Ambassador if it would be possible to restart visits by U.S. Muslims who, like the imam from New York, have a moderate view of Islam.

Comment

19. (SBU) Gaynutdin was effusive in his response to President-elect Obama's election and seemed sincere in his desire to work with the Embassy on future visitors' programs. His desire to keep his own "vertical of power" within the muftiate, however, came through strong and clear. We have proposed an IVLP on "Religious Education in America" designed for representatives from Russia's five Islamic universities

and based on a successful program for Saudi educators inaugurated several years ago. We will reach out to Gaynutdin for his suggestions of a representative from the Russian Islamic University in Moscow that falls under his purview and look for additional opportunities to bring American Muslims and U.S. Islamic scholars to Russia.

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